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From left, Donna Berry, Megan Corcoran and Ruth Silverschatz hold signs protesting proposed cuts to arts organizations Wednesday night outside Old County Hall.

Charles Lewis / Buffalo News

Speakers urge county to restore budget cuts

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Published: November 10, 2010, 10:09 PM

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Updated: November 11, 2010, 7:35 PM

A variety of cultural advocates, public library supporters and Erie County workers packed the County Legislature chambers Wednesday evening to implore lawmakers to restore cuts in County Executive Chris Collins' proposed 2011 budget.

More than 400 showed up outside County Hall to patiently wait their turn to enter the chambers and criticize the nearly \$1 billion spending plan, which cuts funding to all but 10 cultural agencies in the county, jettisons 200 county worker positions and strips \$4 million from public libraries.

Scores showed up for a rally on the steps of the county building about a half-hour before the budget hearing began, many of them carrying signs touting specific grievances. The rally was broken up by county guards from the building who directed the crowd to line up alongside the building.

"This is a great turnout, the biggest we've ever had show up for anything that was

held at the Erie County legislative chambers," said Edmund Cardoni, executive director of Hallwalls, one of the cultural groups that would get no county funding.

Cardoni noted that he has attended many other county budget hearings in years past where there were empty seats.

Such was not the case Wednesday as more than 200 lined up outside waiting to get inside the building while nearly 200 more had already filled the chambers to capacity. As speakers who had already addressed legislators left the building, those waiting outside were let in.

Eva Doyle, a retired Buffalo public school teacher and perennial participant in the budget hearings, was the first to address lawmakers, lamenting that Collins' budget undermines the message that educators have been sharing with their students.

"I spent 30 years teaching in Buffalo, telling my students to make the library their second home and encouraging them to develop themselves by attending plays and visiting museums," Doyle said.

"As far as I am concerned, libraries and all of our cultural institutions should be off limits when it comes to the budget-cutting process," she added.

Meanwhile, Nancy Grant, supervising accountant in the Erie County Comptroller's Office who oversees tax collection, was one of a succession of workers in Comptroller Mark C. Poloncarz's department to decry plans to cut his staff by about one-third.

"I am here to warn of the impending disaster threatening the collection of \$230 million of the budgeted 2011 Erie County tax revenue if these proposed cuts are allowed to stand," Grant said.

"If these positions are cut, who will process these payments? What happens to the taxpayers who come in to pay? Do we turn these people away and say we don't want your money? What happens to the [taxpayers] who have questions or problems?" she asked, as Poloncarz looked on.

Randall Kramer, artistic director for MusicalFare Theatre and a spokesman for the Greater Buffalo Cultural Alliance, was joined by Laurie Dean Torrell of Just Buffalo Literary Center in delivering their message.

"The proposed budget is not a funding cut. This is a zeroing out of all funding for small and midsize organizations. This is a funding elimination," Kramer said.

Routinely, he said, tax breaks are given to local businesses to spur development while long-standing cultural organizations are viewed differently.

"The point is that government funding for businesses in our community happen all the time. The culturals aren't asking to be treated specially, just the same," he added.

A group of West Side Buffalo youth led by Nekia Kemp, director of youth programs

for Star Kids, also addressed lawmakers in hopes of restoring funding to the after-school and summertime program.END

Prior to the start of Wednesday's hearing, Legislator Betty Jean Grant expressed optimism that some of the cuts for to the libraries and cultural groups would be restored.

"We identified \$6 million where the money can be taken from to restore \$3 million to the libraries, \$2 million to the culturals and also to the Prime Time," a cultural program, Grant said.

In a bid to restore cuts, Grant suggested the possibility of a 20 percent cut in legislative staff. "There's nothing off the table to restore the monies for the cuts," she said.

However, Grant Loomis, a spokesman for Collins, issued a statement Wednesday saying the proposed budget accomplishes Collins' primary goal of not raising taxes.

"The budget also takes the fiscally responsible steps of paying down debt and making critical investments to protect taxpayers in the future. The weak national economy, unsustainable municipal union contracts and the continued dysfunction in Albany have forced some tough budgetary decisions, but they are necessary to keep taxes low and spending under control," Loomis said.

Meanwhile, Legislature Clerk Robert M. Graber said the Legislature's Community Enrichment Committee will hold another budget hearing that will be open to the public at 7 p.m. Tuesday in the Harlem Road Community Center, 4255 Harlem Road, Amherst.

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Comments

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